

Social anxiety experiences and responses of university students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the responses of university students in social anxiety situations in order to create a psychological counselling program with a structured group based on Cognitive Behavioural and Existential Approaches. These responses involve the behaviour and thoughts of the university students in situations where they experience or anticipate social anxiety. The semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was used in the study during the face-to-face interviews with fifty-one 4th year students from the Guidance and Psychological Counselling (GPC) and Pre-School Teaching (PST) departments. The scope of the interview form includes the situations where 1) students experience social anxiety in the school setting and their thoughts and behaviours regarding these situations, 2) the situations where they anticipate social anxiety in their future profession, and 3) the situations where they experience social anxiety in their daily lives. Our aim was to collect data from these areas. The data collected were analysed through content analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the thoughts regarding the social anxiety situations of the final year students studying in Guidance and Psychological Counselling and Pre-School Teaching departments are generally negative and their behaviour usually presents as desertion or avoidance.

Keywords: university students, social anxiety, group counselling.

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1. Introduction

In contexts where an individual is considered healthy, one of the most important health-related factors is emphasized by highlighting psychosocial health in addition to physical health. When psychosocial health is discussed, definitions including interaction with other people are offered. Humans are social creatures and their existence is usually defined by the way they form and maintain relationships. However, an individual not only communicates with the other people but also has a life-long continuous dialogue with their inner self. The challenges they experience with their inner self and with the people around them cannot be dealt with apart from the thought processes they possess and the behaviours they exhibit.

Ozturk, Sayar, Ugurad and Tuzun (2005) studied the social interactions within the constantly developing and complex social structure by individuals, and emphasized that some individuals are able to express themselves comfortably within these parameters while others are not. This situation is defined by Gumus (2010) as the discomfort and tension experienced as a result of the expectation that the person will not express himself comfortably in social situations, be put in a bad position, leave a negative impression and/or be judged negatively by others. According to Kazdin (2000), this is a case of fear and it leads the individual to display social avoidance behaviour in social settings. Social avoidance can clearly be seen in cases of meetings and similar events that require social interaction.

Social anxiety is identified as an interactional problem and manifests itself in the daily lives and academic activities of university students and has a widespread impact on interaction with others. As is known, formal and informal education play a crucial role in the development of social skills, which in turn plays an important role in maintaining the life of an individual. Education starts in the family at the early stages and continues in importance during the university and preparatory years for future professional life.

University students are expected to display the appropriate behavioural changes for their profession in cognitive, behavioural and psycho-motor areas as a result of their education. It becomes compulsory to express themselves as an adult and candidate for their chosen profession in the direction of these expectations. However, it has been observed that university students experience social anxiety or withdraw in their relationships with friends and teachers when they are required to do a presentation or take part in in-class discussions.

This is primarily due to concern over the idea of being humiliated or perceived as incompetent. The numbers of students who feel uncomfortable in groups, who cannot express themselves in class, break out in cold sweat, or are shy to speak up in crowds even when they know the answer to the questions asked in class is not negligible. This problem threatens not only their success in educational life but also the harmony in working life and professional performance as future teachers or their ability to provide psychological help. Thus, it is crucial to eliminate the social anxiety as early as possible or at least for individuals to learn how to manage these social anxieties.

2. Method

3. Research Design

This is a qualitative research and used the semi-structured interview technique.

4. Population and Sample

The participants of the study are 51 students in total studying in the Guidance and Psychological Counselling and Pre-School Teaching Departments of the European University of Lefke during the 2014-2015 spring semester.

5. Data Collection Tool

The semi-structure interview form developed by the researchers was used as the data collection tool in the study. Information on the perceptions of university students regarding the concept of social anxiety and their thoughts and behaviours in situations where they experience or they assume they will experience social anxiety are collected through the form via interviews.

6. Data Collection Process

Data of the study were collected through interviews conducted with the students every Tuesday at the Faculty of Education in European University of Lefke between April 16th and May 20th 2015. The interviews took between 25-45 minutes with the final year students of Guidance and Psychological Counselling and Pre-School Teaching departments in order to create a psychological counselling program with a group on reducing social anxiety in teacher candidates.

7. Data Analysis

Data was collected through interviews and analysed via content analysis. The data was analysed in three stages as part of content analysis. Firstly, the data was coded and put into certain categories. These categories are in three main dimensions: 1) "situations students experience social anxiety in the school setting and the thoughts and behaviours regarding these situations", 2) "situations students assume they will experience social anxiety in their future profession", and 3) "situations where students experience social anxiety in their daily lives".

8. Findings

The findings regarding the responses of the final year students of Guidance and Psychological Counselling (GPC) and Pre-School Teaching (PST) departments in order to create a psychological counselling program with a group on reducing social anxiety in teacher candidates are grouped as follows:

1. Findings regarding the social anxiety situations experienced by final year GPC and PST students in the school setting.
2. Findings regarding the thoughts of final year GPC and PST students in relation to the social anxiety situations they experience in the school setting.
3. Findings regarding the behaviours of final year GPC and PST students in relation to the social anxiety situations they experience in the school setting.
4. Findings regarding the social anxiety situations final year GPC and PST students anticipate they will experience in their future profession.
5. Findings regarding the social anxiety situations experienced by final year GPC and PST students in their daily lives.

Findings regarding the social anxiety situations experienced by final year GPC and PST students in the school setting

51 participants were contacted in order to identify the social anxiety situations experienced by university students in the school setting.

The responses of the students to the question "In which situations do you experience social anxiety in school life?" are combined under four headings. The frequency and percentage distribution of the responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution regarding social anxiety situations experienced by final year GPC and PST University students in the school setting

Circumstances with Social Anxiety	GPC Department		PST Department		Total
	F	%	F	%	
Situations where they have to present in front of a group	13	50	12	48	25
Situations where they have to be in crowds	3	11	7	28	10
Situations that require initiating communication	5	19	6	24	11
Situations that require asking for help	5	19	-	-	5
Total	26	51	25	49	51

As can be seen in Table 1, 50% of the GPC students that comprised 51% of the study group and 48% of the PST students comprising 49% of the study group expressed feeling social anxiety in "situations where they have to present in front of a group". While 11% of the GPC students experience social anxiety in "situations where they have to be in crowds" and 19% of them experience social anxiety in "situations that require initiating communication"; the PST students report that 28% experience social anxiety in "situations where they have to be in crowds" and 24% experience social anxiety in "situations that require initiating communication". The GPC students revealed that 19% of them experience social anxiety in "situations that require asking for help" whereas, none of the students from PST department reported this anxiety.

Findings regarding the thoughts of final year GPC and PST students in relation to the social anxiety situations they experience in the school setting

The students were asked "What are your thoughts regarding the social anxiety situations you experience in the school setting?" in order to identify their thoughts on the situations where they experience social anxiety in the school setting. The frequency and percentage distribution of their responses are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution regarding the thoughts of final year GPC and PST students experiencing social anxiety in the school setting

Thought on Social Anxiety Situations	GPC Department		PST Department		Total
	F	%	F	%	
Thinking they are Inadequate	-	-	5	20	5
Thinking that friends and teachers will perceive them as inadequate	6	23	-	-	6
Thinking they will make mistakes in front of others	8	30	-	-	8
Thinking they will be judged by the teachers	5	19	-	-	5
Thinking they will be humiliated in front of others	4	15	7	28	11
Thinking they will be misunderstood	-	-	4	16	4
Thinking that everyone is looking at them in a crowd	3	11	9	36	12
Total	26	50	25	49	51

While none of the GPC students stated “they think they are inadequate” with regard to the social anxiety situations they experience in school, 20% of the PST students expressed that this is what they think in social anxiety situations. When the responses on their thoughts regarding socially anxious situations in school are observed, it is noted that 23% of the GPC students think “they will be perceived as inadequate by their friends and teachers”, 30% of them think “they will make mistakes in front of others” and 19% expressed “they will be judged by the teachers”.

However, none of the PST expressed such thoughts. On the other hand, while 15% of the GPC students expressed their thoughts on “being humiliated in front of others” and 11% of them said they think “everyone is looking at them in a crowd”, of the PST students, 28% expressed their thought on “being humiliated in front of others” and 36% said they think “everyone is looking at them in a crowd”.

16% of the PST students stated they think “they will be misunderstood” in social anxiety situations; while, none of the GPC students expressed this thought.

Findings regarding the behaviours of final year GPC and PST students in relation to the social anxiety situations they experience in the school setting

Students were asked “What is your behaviour in social anxiety situations in the school setting?” in order to identify their behaviour in situations where they experience social anxiety in school. The frequency and percentage distribution of the collected responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution regarding the behaviours of final year GPC and PST students in social anxiety situations they experience in the school setting

Behaviours in Social Anxiety Situations	GPC Department		PST Department		Total
	F	%	F	%	
Retreating from the anxiety-inducing setting	12	46	11	44	23
Keeping quiet in response to questions asked in crowds	8	30	6	24	14
Not asking questions to teachers on any topic	6	23	-	-	6
Not attending the class when they have to do a presentation	-	-	8	32	8
Total	26	50	25	49	51

While none of the GPC students manifested the behaviour of “not attending the class when they have to do a presentation” in social anxiety situations; 32% of the PST students did show this behaviour.

When the responses regarding their behaviours in social anxiety situations in schools are observed, it is noted that 46% of the GPC students “retreat from the anxiety-inducing setting”, 30% of them report “keeping quiet in response to questions asked in a crowd”; while 44% of the PST students “retreat from the anxiety-inducing setting” and 24% of them report “keeping quiet in response to questions asked in a crowd”. It was seen that 23% of the GPC students show the “not asking questions to teacher on any topic” behaviour while none of the PST students showed this behaviour.

Findings regarding the social anxiety situations final year GPC and PST students anticipate they will experience in their future profession

Students were asked "What are the situations where you think you will experience social anxiety in your future profession?" in order to identify the situations where they expect to experience social anxiety in their future profession. The frequency and percentage distribution of their responses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution regarding which situations university students consider as social anxiety-inducing in their future profession

Situations Assumed to raise Social Anxiety in Future Profession	GPC Department		PST Department		Total
	F	%	F	%	
Situations where they have to teach as teachers	11	42	14	56	25
Situations where they need to form eye-contact with their students	15	57	11	44	26
Total	26	50	25	49	51

When the responses to the question on which situations you anticipate will raise social anxiety in your future profession are analysed, it was observed that 42% of the GPC students consider "situations where they have to teach as teachers" and 57% of them consider "situations where they have to make eye-contact with their learners" as possible social anxiety-inducing conditions. As for the PST students, 56% of them stated that they consider "situations where they have to teach as teachers" and 44% assume "situations where they have to make eye-contact with their learners" to raise social anxiety in their future profession.

Findings regarding the social anxiety situations experienced by final year GPC and PST students in their daily lives

Students were asked "In which situations do you experience social anxiety in your daily life?" in order to identify these types of situations. The frequency and percentage distribution of their responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution regarding which situations university students consider as social anxiety-inducing in their daily lives

Daily Life Situations in which Social Anxiety is Experienced	GPC Department		PST Department		Total
	F	%	F	%	
Being in places where daily needs should be met	7	26	7	28	14
Situations that require communication in places where daily needs should be met	6	23	6	24	12
Situations where public toilets need to be used	5	19	5	20	10
Situations that require attending to meeting friends	4	15	-	-	4
Situations that require being close to persons of the opposite sex	4	15	-	-	4
Situations that require eating alone	-	-	3	12	3
Situations that require meeting new people	-	-	4	16	4
Total	26	50	25	49	51

While 26% of the GPC students experience social anxiety in “places where daily needs should be met”, 23% experience social anxiety in “situations that require communication in places where daily needs should be met” and 19% of them experience social anxiety when “they have to use public toilets”.

At the same time, 28% of the PST students experience social anxiety in “places where daily needs should be met”, 24% of them experience social anxiety in “situations that require communication in places where daily needs should be met” and 20% of them feel social anxiety when “they have to use public toilets”. On the other hand, 15% of the GPC students stated that they experience social anxiety when “they have to attend meetings with friends” and another 15% experience social anxiety when “they have to be close to a person of the opposite sex”; whereas, none of the PST students reported social anxiety in such situations.

The responses to the question on which situations students experience social anxiety in their daily lives revealed that 12% of the PST students feel social anxiety when “they have to eat alone” and 16% of them experience social anxiety when “they have to meet new people” while none of the GPC students reported feeling social anxiety in similar situations.

9. Conclusion and Discussion

This study investigated the situations in which final year university students experience social anxiety and their responses to these situations. We attempted to launch a psychological counselling program for reducing social anxiety with a structured group based on Cognitive Behaviourist and Existential Approaches.

The study findings showed that university students feel social anxiety in the school setting when they have to present in front of a group, when entering a crowd and when initiating communication with others. These findings are acknowledged as the social anxieties that require self-confidence as described by Holt, Heimberg, Hope and Liebowitz (1992).

Another finding of the semi-structured interview form is that there are differences between the thoughts of GPC and PST students regarding the situations where they experience social anxiety in the school setting. GPC students showed higher anxiety on being perceived as inadequate by their teachers and friends; whereas, PST students showed higher anxiety on considering themselves inadequate. A review of the literature revealed no study that was directly related to these findings.

In fact, social anxiety regarding humiliation or being perceived as inadequate expressed by students from both departments is what Den Boer (1997) mentioned as the condition where a person perceives himself as humiliated in front of others or inadequate in social situations. As commonly acknowledged, it is very important to be perceived positively and as adequate by others and leave a positive impression. Naturally, an individual is interested in what others think due to a desire to leave a positive impression in social settings. In this regard, people with a more acute need for the approval of others and to be perceived of as adequate and accepted by others will experience a higher level of anxiety compared with individuals who have less of a need.

Another finding of the study is related to the behaviours of GPC and PST students in social anxiety situations in the school setting. Both GPC and PST students report that they manifest behaviours such as leaving the anxiety-inducing setting and keeping quiet in response to questions asked in crowds. From the available literature, Leary and Kowalski (1995) described this situation by stating that an individual who is experiencing social anxiety would show behaviour in the form of avoiding situations where interaction with others is required. Karacan, Senol and Sener (1996) also stated that all individuals with social anxiety tend to retreat from social settings. Therefore, it can be said that the reasons for university students showing desertion or avoidance behaviours is due to fear of humiliation and being judged negatively.

It was found that university students worry that in their future profession they would experience anxiety when placed in the role of teacher and when having to make eye-contact with their students. Similar to this finding Cabi and Yalcinalp's (2009) study on the anxieties of prospective teachers revealed that teacher candidates feel anxiety with regard to issues such as communication with students, school life, professional acknowledgement and setting. Thus, it is not wrong to say that prospective teachers share similar anxieties regarding their future professional lives. This implies that there is a clear need for practices designed for reducing the anxieties of students in teacher education programs.

With regard to the daily life situations where GPC and PST students experience social anxiety, it was found that students from both departments feel anxiety when they are required to be in places to meet their daily needs and when they have to communicate with others.

Similarly, Heimberg (1995) also explained that individuals experience social anxiety in situations such as crowded settings, eating alone, presenting in front of a group, and when using public toilets.

When the findings are taken together and assessed, it is clearly seen that prospective teachers feel social anxiety not only in relation to the materials and subjects they will teach but also to interpersonal relationships, expressing themselves and self-confident behaviour.

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